

# Assassination

by Colin McGlashan



The night they shot Martin Luther King, I was in Harlem. When the radio in the restaurant eventually said that he was dead, no-one moved or spoke. Within 15 minutes, the crowds were in the streets; glass smashed, fires started. Across America, 30 cities burned; a fortnight later, you could smell rotting flesh from the gutted wreckage near 14th and U, a few blocks from the White House.

It was a time of total fear. There were tanks and bayonets in the streets, and curfews; outside Memphis police headquarters one night, a trembling cop jabbed a riot shotgun at my stomach. Americans confronted their country's capacity to destroy itself. Everyone agreed the assassination was a plot; the argument was about the cast of villains. Black militants . . . the CIA . . . the Russians, the Cubans, the Vietcong . . . all these theories were taken seriously. A year later, after a million-dollar hunt by 3,500 agents, the FBI arrested a small-time criminal, but that was nonsense; one man could not have plunged the world's most powerful nation into nightmare.

This book argues convincingly that he did; "they," the conspirators, were merely the aliases of one sad, shabby and unsuccessful

**AN AMERICAN DEATH**, by Gerald Frank (Hamish Hamilton, £4.95).

thief, James Earl Ray. Mr Frank is an experienced reporter, the author of "The Boston Strangler" and similar best-sellers, and he has done his homework remorselessly. Every avenue is explored, every stone turned; every conversation is recorded, allegedly in the words that were used. And, yes, that is how King's staff talked; Mr Frank is a professional. We are told everything it is possible to know — for example, that King used a depilatory, Magic Shave Powder, which smelled like rotten eggs — and lots of things it isn't; what did the surgeon, a white Mississippian, think as he cut open King's body . . . what was a bystander's two-minute impression of Ray when he visited a gun-shop?

We know, above all, about James Earl Ray, down to the last twitch and spasm of his empty, grubby life. He darned his own underpants, answered ads for "swingers," and on July 24 ordered three sex manuals by post. He bought Japanese handcuffs, a chemical which turned glass into a two-way mirror, and a postal

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course in lock-picking. We meet everyone who ever knew him: kids he played with in the town where he grew up, Mexican whores who spent a night with him.

We learn about the hunt; the FBI stopped at nothing. Ray once subscribed to an underground newspaper in California, so suitably attired agents circulated in hippie areas throughout the nation; others checked past and subsequent owners of every car he'd owned in 20 years. When he was caught, in London, the totalitarian precautions became obscene: he was stripped naked in the plane that brought him back, and given two medicals in front of a video-camera. He was loaded into an armoured convoy that was ready for attack by tanks, planes or poison gas. His incarceration in a \$100,000 cell of shell-proof steel plate was so thorough that his lawyers and he lay on the bathroom floor, heads together, with the shower running, to try to escape the television cameras.

I have a total weakness for books like this, and this is a first-rate example of the genre. Yet, in the end, although we have learned everything, we know nothing, except the endless and impenetrable mysteries of even one small and shallow life.